

19. More than a Hero – a Paragon

By Maria Rosery

“I do not know if I would ever sacrifice so much for an idea, but for the first time I have met a person who is definitely a hero although he looks at first glance more like a completely normal granddad.” This is roughly how young people spontaneously react after they have met Denis Goldberg at a school event.

Since 2002 Denis Goldberg has visited the Essen Secondary School at Schloss Borbeck at regular intervals. Just as regularly the younger pupils who have heard about the appearances of the white freedom fighter ask if they can be there one day when a ‘real national hero’ reports on his efforts in the cause of freedom and human rights, and about his life.

In some ten years almost all the pupils as well as colleagues have been able to hear Denis give readings and answer questions afterwards. In the course of time he has steadily developed from a contemporary witness into a committed world citizen who works for reconciliation, solidarity, respect and tolerance.

And then such a historical figure is sitting in the flesh in front of you! An elderly man speaks for two lessons in a sports hall on an improvised rostrum and manages as a result of his personality to draw under his spell about 120 representatives of the ‘X-Factor generation:’ in a friendly and imperturbable way he presents events from his life which are inextricably interwoven with the drama of world history: ‘The Long Walk to Freedom’ was not only taken by Nelson Mandela. Denis Goldberg too, his white companion, fought against the inhuman Apartheid system in South Africa and paid a high personal price: a 22-year imprisonment in a high security prison with countless restrictive conditions, years of rejection by whites who defamed him as a traitor

to the ruling ‘order’ – stolen years of life. The young public receives these insights with respect and the often expressed thought: “How would I react in such a situation?”

When Denis Goldberg tells about the time of Apartheid and also of his imprisonment, you can see open mouths and open ears. Someone is speaking here who was there, who rebelled and fought. But that is not enough. He does not stop at this role in the history books. He sees the new challenges of the young democratic South Africa and carries on – as a helper in building respect and reconciliation, as a fellow citizen who gives new perspectives to disadvantaged young people in particular.

“Cool granddad! The man can’t only speak, he has something to say. And he is always doing things although he could be chilling instead.” Quote from a pupil who normally finds it hard to concentrate in a 45-minute lesson. And so our media-accustomed pupils really do manage to listen to one single person for 80 minutes at a stretch and on their part to impress with deep questions. If there is time as well for autographs, a photo together on your own mobile or an answer to a personal question which you’d rather not ask in front of a big audience, then this has really been ‘school for life’!

Denis Goldberg’s appearances aren’t just a flash in the pan in the consciousness of children and young people: since his first visit our school has held two sponsored runs. Part of the sponsorship money is donated for out-of-school purposes – and the pupils’ council chose Community Heart e.V. as the recipient both times. “We understood that many people in South Africa need support after the abolition of Apartheid. Even though we in Germany moan about school, we know how important questions of education and upbringing are. We are convinced that Denis Goldberg does good things with his organization. Therefore we trust him with our money.” The deputy pupils’ representative Carina Mumm has met with the South African several times in the course of her work and eloquently canvasses for events with Denis Goldberg and for his current projects.

Numerous former pupils now at higher secondary school visit their ‘old secondary school,’ and several teachers also encourage their own children to come, when Denis Goldberg is a visitor. Recently a former pupil came to borrow films and other materials. She wanted to introduce an important personality of contemporary history to the

Religious Studies course at a senior level and had decided on Denis Goldberg. When her Religious Studies teacher also expressed an interest in inviting the South African to her school, she immediately asked about it. Weeks after the presentation she wrote another letter: "I would like to ask you to let me know if he is at our Schloss Borbeck School again, or if he has a meeting in Essen. I am still inspired by him and would be very happy if you could keep me up to date." "How lovely when 'a lasting effect' isn't just an empty phrase!"

When a person is celebrating a jubilee, this offers a chance to look back. For ten years Denis Goldberg has been visiting our classes, and lessons become a global fixture. In the first presentations he orientated himself mainly towards the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, quoting from it and selecting his own points of emphasis. He always stressed the visionary power of freedom and equality and clarified the long-term nature of 'Project Freedom.' Of course the pupils are often light years away from the historical, social and political implications. But when Denis Goldberg simply asks if German reunification has actually healed all the historical wounds, it is visible in the faces of the listeners that he has docked into the horizon of the experience and the questions of the young people.

Denis Goldberg has relied increasingly on his biographical notes and as a result has given his politico-philosophical message its very personal profile:

*All people are equal: his liberal white family home informed his picture of human beings; his beloved young teacher offered him a lesson in matters of tolerance.

*Human beings make history: he relates vividly and understandably how he joined the freedom movement around Nelson Mandela – although he as a white man counted among the privileged in his society, although a glowing future lay open to him as a qualified engineer: "But it was not fair. My work would only ever strengthen the influence of the white minority. I could not build anything for the black population."

*Racism must be combated: Denis Goldberg describes his own observations of symptomatic racist treatment and brave insistence on the dignity of human beings. Quickly there are enough points of contact here for the young people of Borbeck with their own everyday intercultural experiences.

*The political development of South Africa to a democracy with equal rights for everyone is difficult: so much remains to be done so that everybody is supplied with electricity, running water, and homes worthy of human beings, and all schools are supplied with books. And to help children and young people in particular, Denis Goldberg set up the organization Community H.E.A.R.T. which is also active in Germany. The Borbeck pupils enjoy supporting this work.

*Insights into surviving the long imprisonment: here his invitation “to bombard [him] with every thinkable question” is always intensively accepted. Did he ever doubt in his ‘cause’, did he ever think of suicide, did his children never accuse him of leaving them in the lurch?

Denis Goldberg never gives ready-made answers; he never glosses over anything, never wriggles out. Sometimes he takes a deep breath before he speaks again. Every time he confirms to the young people that exactly these personal questions are of great importance. Then he embeds his ‘individual case’ in his personal life circumstances as well as in the context of a person acting consciously, who takes on responsibility, who wants to change indefensible circumstances, who is ready to make personal sacrifices for this and who at the same time is painfully aware that he has demanded great sacrifices from his family, especially his children.

Someone who behaves so openly, honestly and authentically leads people to open their hearts and adopt new ways of thinking. Recently a pupil of Congolese origin asked: “Mr Goldberg, you are white. Do you see yourself more as European or African?” The white South African who had been thus addressed looked intensely at the black skinned German pupil and replied with a smile: “Well, I allow myself the freedom to make use of the best of all cultures.” In that moment other people’s faces also lit up: an ‘immigrant background’, not as a stigma for once, but as an enrichment?! New horizons open up in the consciousness!

“You think, someone’s coming from a poor continent to explain to us the problems that are there. But at the end of two hours I feel as if someone has given me totally new ideas and courage.” This pupil’s reaction is not an isolated case. In the discussions after talks by Denis Goldberg again and again it is clear that the personal encounter with a

committed world citizen endures. The young people appreciate in particular his humour, his subtle irony and his interest in their world.

Denis Goldberg is a bridge builder. Bridges create meetings and open up new paths to us. The engineer Goldberg also creates links between cultures, makes (young) people curious and brave enough to think in different ways and perhaps even to take them.

The community of the secondary school thanks Denis Goldberg here for all the foundations, building blocks and connections which he has solidly created. We see the meetings with him as enrichment and are already looking forward to the next one!

Maria Rosary is a teacher at a secondary modern school in Essen. She teaches German, Geography and politics. She first met Denis at the kitchen table of Dodo Schulz (also a contributor). He tucked into a hearty bowl of winter stew with great gusto.



Maria Rosary is in middle row right – teacher has her hand up!
Foto Maria Rosary collection